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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a review of written information concerning the American Indian that reveals stereotypes, prejudicial statements, and misrepresentation. While manifest destiny was the policy of the government during the late 1800s, social prejudice was used to develop a perception of the American Indians that justified removing them from their lands. Once the tribes became relatively subdued and restricted to tribal lands, social prejudice was expanded to reduce any influence Indians might possess. Older written documents, as well as contemporary literature, have maintained stereotypes of the Indians which depict them in a negative way and deny them the opportunity to excel. While many American Indians have won considerable acclaim in the fine arts, literature, crafts, and sports, prejudice remains. American Indians choosing to remain among their people on tribal lands are viewed as outcasts by society. Organizations representing the government to business groups have appointed themselves as caretakers of the Indians, frequently doing more harm than good to the people and their resources. The general thrust of public policy has been to force the American Indian to become a part of the cultural mainstream. By constantly forcing the Indians away, from their culture, society has made the Indian the United States' most persistent refugee. (Author/SM)

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THE RHETORIC OF PREJUDICE AND PUBLIC POLICY REGARDING THE AMERICAN INDIAN

by

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THE RHETORIC OF PREJUDICE AND PUBLIC POLICY REGARDING THE AMERICAN INDIAN

Margaret E. Galloway

October 10, 1987

Review of written information concerning the American Indian reveals biased stereotypes, prejudical statements, and blatant misrepresentation. These rhetorical depictions find their way into eveything from military reports and newspaper stories to fiction and theatre. The perception of the Indian foisted onto the general public was based upon the growing nation's imperialistic desire to control the North American continent, and a need to justify the systematic destruction of a culture and people not part of the American mainstream.

If "manifest destiny" was the underlying public policy of the government, then social prejudice was the kindling used to fan the general public's fear and eventual hatred for the Indian. Once the tribes became relatively subdued and restricted to tribal lands, this social prejudice was expanded to reduce any vestige of influence that the Indian might possess.

Older written documents, as well as contemporary literature, have maintained stereotypes of the Indian which feeds the dominant society's prejudice while denying the Indian the opportunity to excell at being himself. Those members of the dominant society reared upon the stereotypes presented through the movies and television frequently fail to recognize modern day American Indians living in their own neighborhoods.

In an effort to become self-determining, the Indian has made

little progress toward reversing this aura of prejudice. Many Indians have won considerable acclaim in the fine arts, literature, crafts, and sports. But, it is in the arena of daily life, that the average Indian finds that prejudice remains the strongest. Newspaper accounts of such contemporary urban problems as alcoholism, drug abuse, lack of education, and family breakdown tend to take on an added demension when the individuals involved are of American Indian heritage. Such reports frequently read as if these social problems are to be expected from members of a minority group of inferior social standing. Those American Indians choosing to remain among their people on tribal lands are viewed as outcasts and foreigners by members of the adjacent dominant society. Disruptions of social order are nearly always attributed to the Indians even when the Indians become the victims. Many members of the dominant society feel that it is fully justifiable to prey upon the isolation and frequent poverty of the tribes. Everyone from "Uncle Sam" to "big business" has appointed themselves as caretakers, frequently doing more harm to the people and their resources than any intentional good.

The general thrust of public policy has been to force the American Indian to become a part of the cultural mainstream. It is almost as if the dominant society only wants to acknowledge the existence of the Indian for the purposes of entertaining ceremonies, unusual art, and an exciting historical literature. By constantly forcing the Indian away from his culture and his country, we have made him our most persistent refugee.

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THE RHETORIC OF PREJUDICE AND PUBLIC POLICY REGARDING THE AMERICAN INDIAN

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As an individual with a modest background in rhetoric, I am asking you, my colleagues, to re-evaluate the enduring impact of the written word. Words can be as healing as love, as destructive as bullets, as cleansing as water, and as effective as starvation. The New Testement boldly declares the power of the word with the following statement: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Spiritual considerations aside, almost all academic disciplines give credence to the extreme amount of power which can be wielded by the word, and when words can be coupled with pictures, the power is unbelievable. The Chinese proverb states that "one picture is worth more than ten thousand words". Words and pictures are coupled through various forms of media today with a careless abandon to the effect, whether it be good, or indifferent, or evil. Such carelessness is shown daily in media coverage regarding minority peoples in every culture and country

of the world. I remain open-mouthed with astonishment at the advice constantly spewed forth from the United States Department of State regarding the proper treatment of minorities and/or subjegated majorities in Northern Ireland, Israel, the Middle East, South Africa, or Latin America. After all, who should know more about the affects of assigning a minority to tribal lands under the dictate of a federal bureaucratic department. We can easily show the world how to make instantaneous tourist attractions out of the minority cultures, art, and peoples within their power.

We, in the United States, fail to see our own pompous dignity from the perspective of many people in the rest of the world. Because we are the frequent creator of the media environment, we assume that we both understand and control how the message is received. If we truly believe that, then our message to the world is simply that we did everything in our rhetorical power to destroy the American Indian.

At times the message is so subtle that it is an after-thought. For example, Enrique Fernandez wrote an article in the January issue of Vogue Magazine describing the growing "Hispanization of the United States" (167). The article was intended to be a light, non-threatening, over-view of how the Hispanics were gaining influence outside of the predominent Southwestern area. His last paragraph sounds an important message to the predominant Western European culture of the United States, and I quote:

> Our presence (Hispanic) is more than demographic. In an American culture that has evolved toward isolating individualism, we are reinstituting a powerful sense of family. In the arts we temper a stern puritanical attitude with a penchant for passion. We change everyday life with our social intensity: intense relationships, intense loyalties, even intense partying. We subvert the American racial standoff -- black, white, red -- with all the possibilities of the palette. We are transforming America, reinterpreting its concepts, reorienting its feelings, colonizing its dreams. (240)

No offense meant at all to Mr. Fernandez, but lots of luck! And what does he think the American Indian has been trying to do since 1492?

At Thanksgiving time every year, I am always quietly amused by the media message that pours forth across the land. The all-powerful and always gracious pilgrim forefathers invited the poor starving, heathren redskins to a feast. Right! Right. That's the way it was taught to you in every school pagent from kindergarten on. If you were ever able to break away from censored, textbook propoganda, you probably ran across some first-hand accounts that told you the pilgrims almost starved to death, as did their Jamestown forerunners. If it had not been for the heathren redskins, the supply boats from the motherland would have found many more Roanoaks. Year after year, the media-- TV, greeting cards, plays, and articles--perpetuate the

gracious invitation from the whiteman to the redman: "You are invited to a great feast to celebrate survival. Bring your own food!"

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve tells about her youthful naivete during a car trip from the Rosebud Reservation to the Black Hills. While her father serviced the car at a gas station, Virgina sought the restrooms. She found them: **MEN**, **WOMEN**, and **INDIANS**. You guessed it -- WOMEN was locked. Upon returning to the car she said to her parents, "Isn't it nice that there was a special place for Indians?" (Sneve 11) The irony is not so much in the bigotry of segregation, but in the statement by Ms. Sneve that years later her memory of this important trip to a sacred Indian area was almost totally wiped out by the memory of a gas station restroom (10). Consider the power of a single word.

Leslie Marmon Silko tells about death in her story "The Lullaby." Ayah, an old woman, relives the time when government agents come to her hogan to take her children away because they had been exposed to tuberculosis. Her husband, Chato, had taught her to sign her name. She had been so proud of that achievement. But her signature was to cost her the lives of her son and daughter. "Because it was like the old ones always told her about learning their (the white man's) language or any of their ways: it endangered you" (Silko 57).

In the April 15, 1987 issue of <u>The Chronicle of Higher Education</u>, Karen J. Winkler states "Scholars cannot yet agree on how best to depict the role of the American Indian in the history

of the United States" (7). She goes on to explain that historians at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians could agree that the usual historic presentation of the Indian was "often racist and usually written from a European perspective" (Winkler 7), but had not found agreement on how to present or treat Indians or their contributions within the American history context. Part of the reason given for this confusion regarding the Indian role in history is that those scholars interested in Indian affairs frequently find themselves and their research subjegated to adjunct status. In effect, the status of the subject dictates the status of the scholar. Calvin Martin, an historian at Rutgers University, has introduced another perspective on why the Indian role in history is confused. His theory is that American Indians do not view their history as the "progressive development of human societies", but as "a cyclical experience of nature" (Winkler 13). Therefore, Indians do not identify with or lend credence to the same events that Anglos find important. The Indian viewpoint, in effect, becomes both broader in social concept and more focused in private evaluation.

While historians are struggling with a new image and history for the American Indian, the media has failed to have such twinges of concious. Unfortunately, the mass media, TV specifically, will probably have more immediate rhetorical impact than the historians.

Deloria writes in his book, We Talk, You Listen, that

> We (Indians) need an immediate reassessment of our contemporary situation in terms of a philosophy of self-determination as expressed in **Black Power**. Perhaps, it will have to be called something different. The symbolism of "power" has been worn thin and serves only to block communication at the present time. (105)

Deloria is very much aware of the impact of the rhetorical stereotypes put forth by the media dominated by the Anglo society. He also understands that "power" became synonymous with demagoguery during the Civil Rights Movement when it became "more important to scare people than to communicate with them" (Deloria 104). He stresses the importance of the "integrity of the group" (Deloria 106) in order to communicate with society as a whole.

The February 1, 1988 issue of Higher Education and National Affairs is devoted to the concern for lack of minority participation in higher education. One news article quoting the president of the American Council on Education, Robert H. Atwell, points out that special recruiting programs work when bringing minorities to campuses, but "we doomed them by keeping them marginal to the rest of campus life" (1). What an interesting comment if reflected upon in relationship to the American Indian. The dominant society has spent considerable time and resources keeping the Indian marginal--marginal land, marginal health care, marginal income, and marginal education.

The Sunday, May 17, 1987 issue of the Fort Worth Star-

Telegram carried an article on prejudice by Daniel Goleman. The first sentence states "scientists are finding that prejudice results from a distortion of stereotypes" (AA1). What psychoanalytical research has uncovered about prejudice and stereotyping is exactly what skilled rhetoricians have known since the time of Socrates and Plato. Simply stated, a stereotype is a mental image which becomes a tag or label used by individuals to organize their perceptions of the world. Both stereotyping and prejudice have elements of the positive aspects of discrimination. It is only when stereotyping becomes destructive in its confirmation of prejudice toward individuals or groups in order to set these people outside the mainstream that the negative aspects materialize. There is nothing wrong in the mental desire to bring order out of sensory chaos, but there is something very wrong when that same mental process fails to make the distinction between mental order and personal prejudicial abuse.

Joseph A. Boone writing about feminist criticism in The Chronicle for Higher Education makes a profound statement applicable to feminist and minority literature concerning the manner in which literature both reflects a society and influences it:

> In response to the potential deadlock between political agendas and aesthetic criteria, one branch of . . . literary criticism has moved toward analyzing how social or ideological

> beliefs -- especially those concerning the sexes -- have been translated into literary forms and conventions that at once encode and perpetuate those values. If we can put our finger on what makes a work tick, how its linguistic, stylistic, and structual elements contribute to a meaning that is never really neutral -- we can begin to decipher the ways in which aesthetic and political concerns converge, not only in a given text but also in the culture at large. (76)

It is the "never really neutral" encoding and perpetuating of political and social concerns which has caught the American Indian in a sterotypic bondage.

For example, if the states of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi coveted the lands of the Cherokee and Creek in 1828, then the Indians must be portrayed as blocking the advancement and growth of America's dream of "manifest destiny." During this time of political debate regarding removal of Indians from treatied lands, Edwin Forrest built a theatrical career out of playing the lead character in John Augustus Stone's Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags. Metamora, who is patterned somewhat after King Philip or Metacom of seventeenth-century New England fame, is best known for the range of sterectypic traits of both the noble savage and the red devil. The play demonstrated that when the noble savage stereotype came into "conflict with white

civilization, three possible methods of adjustment were available: willing victimization, acculturation, and extermination" (Grose 186). The play was well received throughout the country accept in Augusta, Georgia where the local citizens were offended by what they perceived as an insult to state policy. Grose analyzed the popularity of the play with nineteenth-century audiences by stating that it played up the two-sided view of Indians most Anglos hold. The drama highlights the positive stereotypic portrayal of the Indian as "loyal, courageous, and despisers of sham" (Grose 190) while showing the negative racial stereotype of the Indian as "nomadic, violent, treacherous, sadistic, and cowardly" (Grose 190) all in the character of Metamora.

Pearce states in Savagism and Civilization that:

> the double image of the Indian, noble and ignoble, had by the end of the first quarter of the century. . .been firmly resolved into one image, that of the savage whose life was to be comprehended by the idea of savagism. Placed in the context of the whole life of American society, his life could not be said to be one totally superior or totally inferior to that of a civilized man. It did not make sense to view his state as one either to be aspired to or to be dismissed with unfeeling contempt; out of contact, for good and for bad, with the life of civilized men. Indian nobility and ignobility, Indian virtures and vices, had to be at once admitted and praised and dispraised for what they

> were, qualities tied together and delimited by the special nature of Indian society. That society was found as a whole to be morally inferior to civilized society; and its moral inferiority was found to be a product of its historical anteriority. The American Indian had long been out of contact with the main stream of civilized life, so long, that he could never participate in that life unless by some miracle he should stop being an Indian. Meantime he lived as an example of the savage life out of which civilized Americans had long grown. He was, in fact, a means to measuring that growth. (119-20)

Such conflicting views popularly held about one group of people actually contributed to the political demand to remove the Indians to more remote lands inorder to save the Indian from himself. Such logic permitted caring Anglos to believe that the Indian would be happier in a foreign land where he could practice his own way of life without the threat of Anglo intervention. The logic stopped short of recognizing that the customs of Indians vary from area to area; that the land might already belong to other tribes of Indians; or that environmental factors might doom removed Indians to generations of poverty. The Anglo culture also stopped short of the reality that as long as there was land to move to, it would be coveted by someone. So the Indians were moved and the government, in its wisdom, sent the military out to keep the peace.

As the American Indian was pushed westward in their own

perverted manifest destiny by the expansion of the frontier, two things transpired which led to the problem with self-determination today. First, federal policy changed from the idea of a remote frontier barrier to one of confinement on designated reservations. Second, the philosophical basis of the reservation system was to be one of benevolent isolation from the mainstream of society. Robert Trennert in his book, Alternative to Extinction, states:

> Nothing was more confusing and perplexing than the formulation of Indian policy during this expansive era. So many factors entered into the fundamental decisions that the results, despite good intentions, often tended to be inconclusive and ineffective. (viii)

The fact that the decisions were frequently made in considerable haste without sufficient knowledge of the Indians involved has contributed to a century of social problems and setbacks.

The first paragraph of Trennert's book makes it clear that all Indian policies have been built on ethnocentric, racist attitudes which proclaimed the "superiority of Anglo-American institutions as a fact" (1). Trennert goes on to say that

> The government wanted to prevent Indian interference with the activities of the "civilized" race while at the same time exercising a benevolent paternalism to assure the survival of at least part of the native population, albeit under controlled conditions. (1)

This policy of "benevolent paternalism" did not always protect

Indian lands from the steady encroachment of white squatters. It would not be until later in the twentieth century that the Indians would begin to have effective redress against the Anglos through well planned court action.

The same greed that drove the Anglos to always covet what the Indian held would eventually lead to bloody resistence by the western tribes. Faced with strong, armed resistence, the government fell back on its long-standing policy of extermination or civilization. Herman Melville in the Confidence-Man: His Masquerade sums up frontier attitudes toward the Indian by stating that frontier, Anglo youth were taught about the "Indian lying, Indian theft, Indian double-dealing, Indian fraud and perfidy, Indian want of conscience, Indian blood-thirstiness, Indian diabolism" (194). It was only after such atroticities as the Sand Creek massacre in December 1864 that eastern liberals began to seriously question popular public opinion and government military actions (Danziger 11). It was not always the military at fault as illustrated by this article in the June 15, 1936 issue of Indians At Work: A News Sheet for Indians and the Indian Service. Indian Commissioner Collier testified during a Senate hearing that "the extermination of a people is going forward in northwestern New Mexico" (1). The antogonists this time were the federal government and "certain live stock barons, numbering not more than a dozen" (Collier 8). Collier stated that the

> . . . weapons of extermination are legislative obstruction

at the Capitol; whiskey, used to persuade desperate and starving Indians to surrender their breeding stock and thus their allotments; and the diseases incident to chronic and increasingly acute malnutrition--gradual starvation". (1)

When it was not the agents and representatives of government and the local Anglo population, the American Indian was left to battle with the whirlwind of society's imagination. Robert Berkhofer makes a poignant assessment in The White Man's Indian when he states "for most Whites throughout the past five centuries, the Indian of imagination and ideology has been as real, perhaps more real, than the Native American of actual existence and contact" (71). Berkhofer makes the point that each generation of artists, writers, and cinematographers is certain that their imagery is closer to reality than anything previous (71), but the results are closer to an evolutionary layering of stereotypic images. Berkhofer indicates that this "continuity results from the relationship between moral evaluation and sensibility and the acceptance or critique of White civilization" (71) which amounts to the manifesto that the Anglo culture and society is always correct. Because of this prevailing attitude, the theme of much artistic expression concerning the Indian is built on the "battle between savagery and civilization" (Berkhofer 91). Berkhofer implies that Anglos were taught that "noble Indians" were to be "pitied" because their culture would not prevail (91). No consideration was to be given to other types of Indians.

During the late 1960s, the American Indian experienced a renaissance of art, crafts, and literature. While the appreciation for all things Indian was partly fueled by talented Indians demanding deserved recognition from society as a whole, the movement was also driven by Anglo guilt and curiosity. The stereotype of the Indian may change some, but the image will still be based upon the Anglo perception of the contrast in cultures which is the core issue (Berkhofer 111).

The "Editor's Page" of the March, 1988 issue of Arizona Highways excerpts a portion of an essay by Bernice Armstrong about her childhood home on the Navajo Indian Reservation. The essay sings the spirit and vitality of many Indian peoples as they express their cultural closeness to the regions they call home. It is this closeness that many Anglos envy and would like to emulate, and when they cannot achieve the closeness then they attempt to destroy the land and the people. Two paragraphs from Mrs. Armstrong's essay paint a new image of the American Indian for all of us to admire.

> When I was young, I often sat there (cliff near home) for a long time, there at the edge of my universe. Mother Earth and my people: together they painted my mind, molded my spirit, sculptured my heart, chiseled my character, hammered and tempered my strength.
>
> Then, and now, in quiteness, in deepest admiration and reverence, my eyes take in the living painting that the Holy Ones created in this part of Mother Earth. (1)

As all thinking peoples of the earth attempt to find ways of peaceful co-existence, let us hope that American Indians will have a voice and an identity that will provide all societies and cultures with new understanding and purpose. By constantly forcing the American Indian away from his culture and his country, the Anglo society has made him our most persistent refugee. It is time to let the Indian create his own image and his own story in his own words. It is time to let him come home.

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